

College Selection, Admission, and Financing

INTRODUCTION

Here are some timely tips on how to strategically navigate what is often a poorly guided and overwhelmingly stressful process: applying to college. The topics of college admission and test-taking are minefields of rumors that have had serious consequences for students. Those who actually do their research soon find out how difficult it is to wade through all the information out there. In fact, it's a challenge to figure out where to even start. Part of the problem is that the rules change so often that keeping up can be a daunting task. Many parents and students are approaching the college application process the same way students approached it in the '70s, '80s, and even the '90s, but it's a completely different ball game now.

THE COMPETITION

You need to know how to play the game to win these days, because the competition is fiercer than ever:

- The number of *potential* college applicants is at an all-time high now that the children of the Baby Boomer generation are graduating from high school.
- *Interest* in a college education is at an all-time high due to the many statistics equating college degrees with higher salaries.
- *Ability* to attend college is at an all-time high due to higher household incomes and more financial aid.
- The result: college *enrollment* has increased by 50% since 1975, by 25% since 1985, and by 10% since 1995 to a new total of over 16 million per year.
- Online and standardized applications have made it possible to apply to several colleges with ease, so the number of applications for each opening is greater than ever before.
- Selective colleges are becoming even more selective because their campuses haven't expanded enough to keep up with the increasing number of applicants.
- Highly selective schools have the largest applicant pools and lowest admission rates in history: Harvard accepted only 2,074 of 22,796 applicants last year, and Yale accepted only 1,880 of 19,448 applicants. In other words, less than 10% of *elite* applicants are being granted admission to top universities.
- There are more academically credentialed students than ever before: 41% of college-bound seniors have at least a 3.7 unweighted grade point average (that's an A-) compared to 31% just 10 years ago.
- Since academic excellence is more common, colleges now consider several non-academic factors very heavily to make their admissions decisions. Harvard alone has turned away *thousands* of applicants with perfect GPAs and SAT scores because they didn't meet their admissions criteria for these other factors.
- Many former "safety schools" have also become much more selective and are no longer safe bets.
- The bottom line: to get into the college of your choice, you have to find a way to stand out in all aspects of your application package.

CHOOSING A COLLEGE

The Criteria

- Here's the kicker: most students wonder how they're supposed to even choose a college – a decision that could shape the rest their life – when it's hard enough trying to decide what they want on their pizza. We make it more difficult than it is, though. There are many great schools out there, and there are several where you're very likely to be happy and prosperous, not just one.
- Students, let me start by saying this: if you take responsibility for the college selection and application process, you'll find that your parents won't bug you about it. Make it your own project for your own sake. Check with your parents to see whether they have any guidelines regarding cost or distance from home, but take it from there to find a college you like.
- The key is to pick a handful of colleges based on what you *want*, not on who you or others *wish* you were. I may not have earned the right to say this yet – I don't know – but it needs to be said: as much as students need to take

responsibility for college selection, parents, you need to let them have that privilege. No coaxing, no conditions, no boundaries, no guilt trips. The college decision needs to be theirs alone, and they need to experience the results of that decision, good or bad. It's part of the growing up process, and it's something they need to do themselves if they're going to mature.

- Now students: do *not* choose a college based simply on its reputation, selectivity, sports teams, or former graduates. There's a lot more to a college than that. What makes a school a good fit for *you* is determined a lot more by your personal likes and dislikes. If you hate the snow, then Harvard is *not* for you. You're going to be stuck at that school for 4 years, so choose one where you'll be happy.
- Use a book or one of the numerous online resources to view college profiles and comparisons. Some factors to consider are the strength of particular academic programs, research opportunities, a rigid or flexible core curriculum, the student-teacher ratio, faculty accessibility, financial aid availability, the number of students, the size of the campus, the campus layout, the look and feel of the buildings, scheduled campus improvements, campus location (urban/suburban/rural, distance from home or major cities), the climate of the area, student organizations, and campus life on weekends.
- When you've identified some colleges of interest, plan to do some research online. College websites are a great resource for information, but keep in mind that the sites are spun to make the schools look good.
- Many colleges have an online catalog and viewbook, so take the time to read the parts you're interested in. If a school doesn't make them available online, email the admissions office to request a catalog, viewbook, application, and any other pertinent materials.

College Fairs

- Ask your guidance counselor for the dates and locations of regional college fairs and plan to attend one.
- Decide which schools you're interested in and make a prioritized list of the ones you have to check out at the fair. Research each of them before you go, and write down any questions that were left unanswered by your research so you can ask the reps at each school.
- Before you go to the fair, print up a few sheets of self-sticking labels with your name, address, phone number, email address, high school, year of graduation, intended major, and extracurricular activities you're interested in. You can stick these on the response cards at the fair to save time filling them out.
- Dress appropriately. Although you won't have any formal interviews, you will meet admissions officers at the tables, and you only have one chance to make a first impression. You don't need to go all out, but your clothes should still be a step up from what you wear around your friends. Think business-casual.
- Get a map of the table locations and figure out the most efficient route to visit all the colleges that you want to. Bring some sort of bag to hold all the materials you'll be collecting in case none are provided.
- Take time to talk one-on-one with a rep at each table. Start building relationships with them by asking about their college experiences and determining the things that you have in common with them.
- Bring a notebook and pens (2 or more) to write down your impression of each school, the answers to your questions about it, and the representative's name before you move on to the next table.
- Bring someone with you, preferably your parents, to attend information sessions while you visit tables.
- When you get home, go through the pile of college materials you received and schedule visits of colleges you were interested in.

Campus Visits

- After doing your research and attending a college fair, narrow your options to less than 12 colleges and start visiting those schools during your junior year of high school. If you're behind, plan to do a lot of traveling this fall. Campus visits are extremely important in the college decision process because schools are often completely different in person than they are in the marketing materials.
- Plan to visit a range of campus sizes and locations. Experiencing the different options may change your preferences.
- Call to set up a campus visit, tour, and interview as early as possible, because slots get booked up quickly. If you give them sufficient advance notice, you may be able to sit in on some classes and stay overnight in the dorms.
- Always schedule campus visits for the school year. Summer is the most convenient time for a visit, but the worst time to experience a college: there are few students and classes, the dorms are empty, the campus may be undergoing renovation, and you'll be self-conscious during the interview about being sweaty from the tour.
- When you call, ask whether the admissions officers give group info sessions and where the tour leaves from (they don't always leave from the admissions office). Schedule your interview to follow the tour so you can go into the interview better informed and have more material for questions.

- Ask to meet with the department chairperson for a major you're considering. Athletes should also contact the coach before visiting to ask about the sports program, scholarships, and interview availability.
- On the day of the visit, get to campus early to allow plenty of time to park and walk where you need to. If you show up late for the tour, you may miss it, and that reflects poorly on you.
- Some things to be looking for during the tour: Is there a student center? Are there enough computers around campus? How are the dorms? How is the library? Are the Phys Ed buildings nice? What are the hours of these facilities? Where are the dorms in relation to the academic buildings and playing fields?
- Some good questions to ask the tour guide:
 1. Classes – What is the typical class size for freshmen vs. upperclassmen? How often are grad students used as professors or teaching assistants? Do the professors just have office hours or do they give out their home phone numbers as well? What is the quality of faculty advising? What outstanding professors or courses might the tour guide recommend regardless of a student's major?
 2. Academic Support Facilities – Is there a writing center? A tutoring center? Are the services free?
 3. Housing – Is housing guaranteed all 4 years? Are coed dorms by wing, floor, or room-to-room? Are there floor bathrooms or suite bathrooms? If they're floor bathrooms, are they coed? (You might think it's insane to even ask, but several schools have coed dorm bathrooms.)
 4. Campus Life – What happens on weekends? Does everyone go home or is there plenty to do? Can freshmen have cars, and are they necessary? How's student turnout at sporting events?
 5. Fraternities and Sororities – What percent of students get involved? Do they have their own houses? When is rush? Are parties open to the rest of the student body? Does the administration plan any changes to the system? Are non-Greeks comfortable on campus?
 6. Campus Safety – Does the tour guide feel safe walking on campus at night? How about in the surrounding neighborhood, in all directions?
- Try to attend at least one freshman and one upperclassman lecture, and take notes on your impressions.
- Cut through the admissions propaganda by getting an insider's perspective on the college. Ask a few students for their take on the college, and pick up a student newspaper to see what the hot issues are.
- If you plan to live on campus – whether you're staying overnight or not – eat the dorm food during your visit. Ask about dorm rules and curfews. If you're spending the night, find out from a student whether the dorm you were placed in is the normal freshman dorm. If it's not, be sure to visit the one that is.
- Before you go home, drive around the outskirts of the campus to get a feel for the neighborhood.
- Realize that visiting on a rainy weekend when there's nothing to do will make a campus seem much worse than one where you stayed in a brand new dorm during the most beautiful week of the year. Try to make allowances for these luck factors when you make your decision, and if you need to, visit the campus again when the weather is nicer.
- The colleges you finally decide upon should be well-rounded in several areas of interest so that your happiness isn't contingent on a single aspect that could easily change.
- Don't allow the distance from home to inhibit your choice if you can afford out-of-state or private tuition. When you make friends, your desire to come home will diminish. And since colleges seek geographic diversity, it may work in your favor for admissions.
- Finally, listen to your gut about how the college feels to you. If something just doesn't feel right, don't force it; there are plenty of other schools that would be better for you.
- It's a good idea to apply to at least 3 schools. Limit the number of applications to 10 to keep costs down and to make sure you have enough time to do a first-rate job on each application.
- If money or time is an issue, you can take online tours to decide where to apply. You can then limit the number of visits you need to make by waiting until your applications have been accepted, then using the campus visits to decide where to enroll. Keep in mind that this is a little risky, because if you end up hating all the schools you were accepted to, then your application there was a waste of time and money. Not only that, but you will have also lost the opportunity to apply to colleges that may have suited you better, and it may be too late to apply to those schools by the time you receive your admissions decisions.

THE GAME PLAN

Now put yourself in the position of admission officers for a moment. They must choose a limited number of students from this huge mass of qualified candidates, and that's not an easy task. They want to choose students who demonstrate potential to excel in college and the professional arena so their institution will have a good reputation for being associated with them. At the same time, they only want to admit those who will definitely attend their college if accepted because they don't want to waste slots that other qualified candidates could have filled. If you think about college admission from their perspective, the specific qualities they would look for in applicants almost become a matter of common sense.

Factors of Admission

How to Optimize Your Application

1. Course Transcript	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Your transcript indicates the number and difficulty of your courses, and colleges look at it to gauge both your ability and your ambition. Enriched, honors, accelerated, AP, IB, and college co-op classes demonstrate – as one college stated it – “your commitment, motivation, and willingness to take on challenges.” Those who work hard in high school are more likely to work hard in college and to accomplish a lot after college, which would give the school a good name for being associated with you.• Each college has its own <i>minimum</i> high school course requirements, but the ideal course load includes 4 English courses (with a composition class if possible); 4 math courses; 4 sciences, including biology, chemistry, physics, and an AP course; 3 social sciences, including both American and European history; 4 years of one foreign language; a computer course; and music, visual arts, or performing arts coursework.• If you’re behind where you’d like to be in your class difficulty, consider doubling up in a subject, taking summer school, or working through a homeschool program (like NOVEL) to move up a year.• This <i>seriously</i> conflicts with senioritis, but colleges consistently list the course transcript as the single most important admissions factor.
2. GPA	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• GPA demonstrates your long-term commitment to excellence, your multi-tasking skills, and your ability to prioritize.• Colleges consider grades in college prep courses more important than those of other courses, but overall GPA has risen in importance because of the nationwide emphasis on finding well-rounded students.• Getting good grades only in certain subjects sends up a red flag for admissions officers. They want to know that you can handle a variety of material and succeed even if you don’t like the subject. So do the best you can in all subjects, and seek help from the teacher or good students in subjects of difficulty.• Colleges consider both your unweighted GPA (4.0 scale) and weighted GPA (weighting standards for advanced or AP courses vary by school), so going to the highest level you can and acing the subjects you’re good at helps to compensate for lower grades in other classes.• The #1 problem for most students is <u>motivation</u>. What unmotivated students don’t realize is that almost everyone hates school just as much as they do – even the best students. Good students just realize there are some things in life that you have to do even if you don’t want to. After you graduate from college, there are going to be plenty of days that you’ll wake up and want to do anything but go to work. But these things are necessary means to an end: you’ll have to go to work and do your best to keep your job and pay the bills, and you have to do your best at school – even if you hate it – if you’re going to get into college and get a good job. My parents didn’t have money to send me to college, so I knew I’d have to work hard so I could get scholarships to go. Your parents might have the money for college, but if you work hard now and get scholarships, they can use that money to buy you a new car, or even to make a down payment on a house. Bringing up your GPA may require a new start for you. Great – do it. Working a little harder now won’t be as life shattering as you think, and I promise it will be well worth it in the end.• The #2 problem for most students, believe it or not, is <u>organization</u>. They often get the assignments and lose them somewhere between school and home, or do the assignments and lose them somewhere between home and school and then never turn them in. This can make students feel overwhelmed and hopeless fairly quickly. The best way to fix this is to consolidate everything. Don’t write warm-ups or notes on looseleaf paper; buy one 5-subject notebook to write them all in, and label each section for the classes that regularly require notes. Buy a 3-hole punched, heavy-duty pocket folder for every class, then label each one to keep all handouts, homework, quizzes and tests in. Buy a single binder, 3 inches or larger, to hold all the folders in order of the periods of

the day, with looseleaf paper in the front. And write all the homework assignments for each day, for every class, on one page, either in a little notebook or on the top sheet of looseleaf in your binder. If a teacher requires an individual notebook or binder for certain things, ask the teacher if your system will work for them. If it won't, make that binder or notebook a special case, a rare exception to the rule, and keep everything else in the big binder and notebook.

- The #3 problem for most students is note-taking. Good test scores start with good notes, yet many students write down only what the teacher puts on the board or the overhead, leaving their notes fragmented and incomplete. Often students who study those notes diligently still do poorly on tests because so much of the material wasn't in their notes. Good students write down what teachers say to connect ideas so they can make sense of it all later when they need to study. The best students try to organize their notes into outline form as they take them so they can see how the ideas relate to one another. It's a good idea to get a photocopy of a good student's notes after every class, and even of the teacher's notes if possible, to make sure yours are complete. If you try to make your notes the most complete and organized, soon you won't need anyone else's notes.
- The 4th major obstacle for students is their studying technique. Many students read through their notes the night before a quiz or test and leave it at that, but sleep and dreams are enough to erase everything you read by themselves, and by the time you add family, school, and extracurricular concerns to the mix, it's nearly impossible to remember everything you read. First of all, the studying process should always be more active. As you read your notes, cover parts of the page and quiz yourself to make sure you've remembered what's there. Unless you can recall the information on demand, it hasn't been burned in your brain yet, and you'll miss that problem on the test. Then right before the test, go over your notes quickly to refresh your memory, especially any parts that were difficult to remember the night before. Your short-term memory will help to fill in any gaps your long term-memory left.
- The 5th and final obstacle for most students is time management. Many students find themselves without enough time to get everything done, and as a result, they turn in half-done – IF they turn it in on time, IF they turn it in at all. But time is the one thing all of us have the same amount of, and the fact that there are plenty of valedictorians involved in a ton of extracurricular activities who still have time to have fun with their friends proves that it can be done, it's not an unrealistic expectation. The key is to know how to do these 3 things:
 1. Cut out the clutter – our continuous quest for entertainment is the greatest hindrance to human accomplishment. You'd be amazed at how much time you'd have if you cut out TV and video games alone. Yes, this can be done as a teenager – I quit both when I was a junior in high school, and to this day I average less than 2 minutes of TV a week (when someone else is watching it that I came to talk to). You don't have to give these things up entirely; just save them for when you have absolutely nothing else to do. In the process you might even discover some other great things in this world that you could do for fun.
 2. Write everything down – writing down all of your activities and responsibilities will save you the stress of trying to remember them and the consequences when you can't. Get a basic weekly planner and use it to record when you have to do what, and even to schedule in study time. If you're willing to spend \$15, you can get one like mine that fits easily in the front pocket of a bookbag yet still holds a planner, a telephone & address directory, and a notebook that you could use to record all your homework in.
 3. Prioritize – when it comes to schoolwork, do first what's due first. However, there will be times when there's just too much to get everything done. In those cases, you have to decide what's most important, whether that means finishing the assignment worth the most to your

	<p>grade, doing the work for the class you have the lowest grade in, or saying no to some extracurricular or social stuff so you can get your assignments done. If you can tell already that you have too much to work to get it all done by the due dates, explain the situation to your teachers and ask for an extension <i>before</i> the due date arrives.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notice that all of these skills are necessary to excel academically, and they're all interrelated. Being organized won't get you anywhere unless you're motivated to do well, but your motivation will soon wane if you're not organized. Likewise, it doesn't matter how good your notes are if you can't find them, but finding those notes won't do you any good unless they're complete. Your studying is futile if you have lousy notes, but good notes are worthless if you don't know how to study them. It doesn't matter that you can manage your time if you don't use it to study, and it doesn't matter if you know how to study if you can never find the time to do it. • Doing all these things is guaranteed to raise your GPA, and with it, your chances for admission to the college of your choice.
<p>3. Class Rank</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class rank demonstrates your ability to rise to the level of the academic environment. It's based entirely on GPA, so colleges use it to compensate for differences in high school weighting systems, grading scales, and difficulty levels. • Selective colleges typically admit students ranked in the top 10% of their class • The importance of class rank has been steadily decreasing since there are so many good students now.
<p>4. SAT Scores</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standardized tests such as the SAT, ACT, and SAT Subject Tests demonstrate cumulative mastery of the core academic subjects of high school. They also provide colleges with more objective and comparable numbers by which to judge their applicants since class quality differs from school to school and teacher to teacher. • The SAT is a 3-hour-and-45-minute test administered 7 times a year beginning in October. It has received a lot of press over the years for its non-standard math and verbal question formats, and it recently stole headlines for being completely overhauled. The "New SAT" no longer includes analogies or column comparisons, but has enhanced math content (including Algebra 2), more critical reading passages, a new grammar and writing skills section, a 25-minute essay, and a 2400-point scoring scale. The new SAT was implemented March 12, 2005, and all college applicants for the fall of 2006 or later <i>must</i> submit scores from the new test. The average score for seniors is predicted to be between 1500 and 1600. • Sophomores and juniors should ask their guidance counselors about signing up for the Preliminary SAT (PSAT) as soon as school starts this fall. The PSAT, a 2-hour-and-10-minute test offered in mid-October every year, is just a miniature version of the SAT without Algebra 2 content or an official essay (a mock essay experience is offered). It's good practice for the SAT, but it also makes <i>juniors</i> eligible for National Merit recognition and scholarships, and allows <i>all students</i> to participate in "Student Search" so interested colleges may send them materials. Taking the PSAT as a sophomore gives students the advantage of getting a feel for test-day conditions before it counts for the record. • Because the PSAT is such a big opportunity, I <i>highly</i> recommend that students study for it thoroughly and take practice tests beforehand, even as a sophomore. • Students should then prepare for and take the SAT in May or June of their junior year and again in October or November of their senior year. In other words, students should take the PSAT twice and the SAT twice. • Taking the SAT or ACT more than 3 times without a significant score improvement starts to look bad to admissions officers, but a decent score increase from one test to the next (100-150 points) demonstrates dedication

	<p>and a strong work ethic.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This may sound like a lot of tests, but they're so important to college admissions officers that it has to be a priority. The good news is that colleges take the highest overall score of each test. • The SAT is like a game. Knowing how the game is played gives you a huge advantage over those who are ignorant of the rules. Take time to study and take practice tests before the real thing. The College Board's <i>Official SAT Study Guide: For the New SAT™</i> is the best practice book out there. • There are many books available that present strategies for approaching each question type as well as thorough content reviews for each test. These are generally more helpful than the College Board's official book, but the practice problems and tests written by the test maker are always more accurate representations and therefore build confidence better. • Before taking practice tests, students should do a thorough content review (math, grammar, and vocabulary for the SAT) and learn strategies for approaching the specific question types on the test. They should then do untimed practice problems to learn how to apply the content knowledge and strategies, then take an untimed, open-book practice test. Since they have thoroughly prepared and took the test untimed and open-book, they should expect to get every single question correct. The fact that they miss any problems should bother them and motivate them to thoroughly review the test and learn from their mistakes. Students should then take an untimed, closed-book test and expect substantial improvement, review and learn from mistakes, then take a timed, closed-book test just like they will on test day. • Because the size of these books makes them cumbersome, many high school students aren't disciplined enough to go through them on their own. That's why many companies provide test prep classes to present this information in a more familiar format and assist with question answering. My company offers these classes as well. Review the characteristics of each class to choose the one that best meets your specific needs.
<p>5. ACT Scores</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ACT is a 2-hour-and-55-minute test offered 6 times a year beginning in late September. Midwestern schools actually prefer the ACT, and most colleges will accept it in place of the SAT without giving preference to either test score. The ACT's question format is much more straightforward and content-based than that of the SAT, but the ACT allows much less time to complete each problem. The ACT recently added an optional 30-minute essay to the test, but most schools want you to take the essay section if you take the test. The ACT is scored on a scale of 1-36 with an average senior score of 20. • The SAT and ACT are much more similar now that the SAT has been changed. The only major <i>content</i> differences are that unlike the SAT, the ACT includes trigonometry and a Science Reasoning (data analysis) section, but doesn't test vocabulary or make the essay mandatory. However, the test <i>formats</i> are so different that I highly recommend taking both tests to see which one you do better on. • The ACT likewise has a preliminary test, the PLAN, which is offered by many schools sometime in the fall. The test is aimed at sophomores but may also be taken by juniors. It is also good practice for the real thing and gives students the advantage of getting a feel for test-day conditions before it counts for the record. • Students should take the ACT in April or June of their junior year and again in September or October of their senior year. In other words, they should take the PLAN once (if possible) and the ACT twice. • Colleges also take your highest ACT score. A decent score increase from one test to the next (2-3 points) demonstrates dedication and a strong work ethic. • Before taking the ACT or the PLAN, students should study content and strategies and take practice tests in <i>The Real ACT Prep Guide</i> using the same study technique as recommended for the SAT (untimed, open-book test at first, then thorough review and progression up to timed tests).

<p>6. SAT (II) Subject Test Scores</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SAT Subject Tests, formerly called SAT II Subject Tests, are standardized tests that demonstrate your overall grasp of a subject's curriculum. Scores are used to determine admission, course placement, and to advise admitted students on course selection. • Many colleges no longer require students to take these, but many still do. Some colleges require students to take 2-3 of these tests. Those who do say it's your choice which tests to take, but they really prefer one test each from math, the sciences, and the humanities. • Each subject test is a 1-hour test offered on the same dates as the SAT. Tests are currently offered for 20 different subjects including English literature, math, the sciences, history, and foreign languages. Each test has a straightforward, content-based question format. The tests are scored on an 800-point scale with an average score of about 600 for each subject. • Up to 3 Subject Tests can be taken on one testing day, but students may not take the SAT I the same day as any SAT II Subject Test. • Take SAT Subject Tests only for your strongest subjects, and take them at the end of the school year that you cover that material so it's still fresh in your mind. The only exceptions are English language and foreign language tests, which you should take in the fall of your senior year since the content being tested is cumulative. The best plan is to take the ACT in September, the SAT in October, and an SAT language test in November of your senior year (when they offer listening options). • Take time to study and take practice tests beforehand in the College Board's <i>Real SAT II Subject Tests</i> or in books aimed at each test.
<p>7. AP/IB Exam Scores</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Advanced Placement (AP) program is a college-level course program sponsored by the College Board and offered at most schools. Each course prepares students for the AP exam in the spring, which earns college credit in that subject for students who do well enough. • Because no one is required to take AP courses or exams, taking them demonstrates ambition, academic interest and discipline, and maturity. • The exams vary in length by subject, but each is about 3 hours long and is offered only once a year. Courses and exams are currently offered for 34 different subjects including English language and literature, math, the sciences, computer science, psychology, history, government, economics, geography, foreign languages, art, and music. Each exam has a straightforward, content-based question format. • AP exams are scored on a scale of 1-5, and you generally need a 4 or a 5 to get college credit. Most students feel they do poorly on the exams, but a score that translates to getting just $\frac{2}{3}$ of the questions correct – the equivalent of a D in class or a 600 on the SAT – receives a 4. • If you do well in an AP course but don't get a good exam score, college admissions officers take into consideration how long the AP program has been at your school and how the other students in your class did. It's not a complete waste of your hard work if you don't get a 4 or 5, but it is a lost opportunity to save time and money. Whatever your AP exam score is, AP classes look great on a transcript, help your weighted GPA, and prepare you for the class environment and workload of college. • Take time to study and take practice exams beforehand in the College Board's AP exam prep books for each subject. • The International Baccalaureate Diploma Program is a rigorous college prep program standardized worldwide and offered only at select high schools and partnering colleges. Just like the AP program, each course prepares students for the IB exam at the end of the school year, which earns college credit in that subject for students who do well enough. Ask your guidance counselor whether a program is available near you. • Because no one is required to take IB courses or exams, taking them demonstrates ambition, academic interest and discipline, and maturity. • IB exams are scored on a scale of 1-7, and you generally need a 6 or a 7 to get

	<p>college credit. Again, it's not a complete waste of your hard work if you don't get a 6 or 7, but it is a lost opportunity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whatever your IB exam score is, IB classes look great on a transcript, help your weighted GPA, and prepare you for the class environment and workload of college. • Take time to study the IB course's curriculum and go to any extra practice sessions at school before taking the IB exam.
<p>8. Extracurricular Activities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extracurricular (out-of-class) activities demonstrate your talents, skills, interests, drive and initiative, time management skills, and desire to contribute to others. Colleges use them to gauge your involvement in life and contribution to your community, so they're the primary means of proving to admissions officers that you're not just a brainiac. • The term "extracurricular activities" encompasses everything you do in a somewhat structured environment outside of school classes, including jobs, school clubs, sports, music, the arts, religious activities, community service, and other community involvement. • Get involved in extracurricular activities early – your freshman or sophomore year – both to find something you like and to give yourself time to gain a role of responsibility or leadership position. • Consider extending your academic strengths into extracurricular activities such as science fairs, debate teams, or the school newspaper. • Consider turning academic hobbies such as computer repair or gaming into extracurricular activities such as game testing or competition. • Community service is one of the activities which colleges like to see the most, but which students tend to neglect the most. • Whatever it is that you choose, don't try new activities every year – it makes you appear indecisive and noncommittal. Find something you like and stick with it. • Likewise, get heavily involved in a few things rather than casually involved in many. Seek leadership roles to demonstrate dedication and develop your leadership skills. Admissions officers want to see evidence of responsibility, not attendance. • Take some time to rest during the summer, but don't take summers off completely. Otherwise, you'll send the message to admissions officers that if you had the choice, you would do nothing. Pursue something that interests you – whether it's an academic summer program through a university or something non-academic like being a camp counselor – and try to do it several summers in a row. If possible, pursue a summer activity that is similar to your school-year extracurriculars. • If you have a job, the kind of job makes a difference despite the pay (e.g., a lab or veterinarian's assistant vs. retail sales or waiting tables). Even more important are your performance and longevity in the position, not only for the sake of future recommendations, but also because having several jobs makes admissions officers wonder whether you were fired or you quit, whether you get bored or have a bad temper – all things that reflect on your dedication and maturity. • Keep track of all your activities <i>as you do them</i> so you don't have to try to remember 3 years of activities and achievements all at once. If you haven't done that, sit down in the spring of your junior year and write down all the activities, awards, and leadership roles you can remember. Ask your parents, siblings, and friends what they remember you being involved in, and save the list to add to it as other things come to mind. • The Common Application, which I will describe in-depth next, has separate sections for your activities, academic awards or honors, and employment. List all academic awards and employment in chronological order, but only list jobs that had significant roles or longevity. List only your most impressive activities, and do so in the order of interest to you. Be sure to check the box that says you plan to participate in that activity in college if there's a chance that you would do so on some level. • In addition, make a comprehensive 1-page (front and back), prioritized "brag

	<p>sheet” to include with your application. It should mimic the exact format of the Common Application, but your activities category should be further divided into the subcategories of academic, athletic, artistic, club, community service, and summer involvement. List all of your awards, jobs, and activities with your degree of participation, leadership roles, awards, and honors – just as you did on the Common Application – but add to that any accomplishments that didn’t receive recognition. Place the most impressive activities and accomplishments at the top of each subcategory.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclude informal activities (e.g., weight training, camping, or model-making) unless you spent a significant amount of time doing that each week or they could pertain to a possible college major (e.g., exercise science, forestry, or engineering).
<p>9. Application Forms</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The appearance and contents of the application form itself demonstrate your meticulousness and interest in the college. If you have great qualifications but a messy or brief application, admissions officers will think you have a tendency to blow off important things if you consider them unimportant or to get lazy when it’s time to finish the job. • The Common Application is accepted by most colleges now, so use it. It saves time even with colleges that require a supplement to it. Again, the application can be accessed at www.commonapp.org. • Since PDFs and online forms make it easy to type your application forms, use them. This eliminates concern about handwriting neatness and ink smearing. • If you register with the Common Application website, you may fill out the Common Application and submit it electronically to various colleges. If you choose this option, save and print the entire application, including essays, before you send any part of it. That way you can have several people edit it fully, make all necessary corrections, and adjust the application for each school before submitting your final copy. • The Common Application is also available in PDF format if you prefer to type your answers on the form and mail your application with all the other materials. This can make the application process a lot easier, because you can collect all the application components, send them all at once, and know that application package is complete (rather than wait for one part to show up at one time and another to get there later).
<p>10. Application Essays</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application essays demonstrate your ability to organize your thoughts and express yourself clearly and maturely on any given topic. Colleges use them to evaluate your breadth of education, knowledge, experience, and creativity, and to determine whether you have the potential to write the kind of quality papers that the college professors demand. Application essays have steadily increased in importance to colleges over the last 10 years. • Even before you decide upon colleges, download the Common Application and read the essay questions (I will discuss the Common Application further in our next admission factor). The new Common Application will be available at www.commonapp.org in early July, so I <i>highly recommend</i> downloading the application and evaluation forms right after the July 4th weekend. It’s difficult to juggle senior classes, activities, college applications, and scholarship searches all at once, so get a head start by getting as much of the application out of the way during the summer as possible. • The Common Application requires only 2 essays: one short answer and one personal statement. The short answer question must be answered within the space provided on the application, which only allows for a paragraph or so. The personal statement must be typed separately on 1-2 double-spaced pages. • Treat the short answer (paragraph) essay the same way you would a full essay: plan and write your response separately, trying to include enough content to fill the space provided, then edit the essay and transfer it to the application. This year’s short answer prompt is “Describe which of your extracurricular activities has been most meaningful and why.”

- The personal statement may be on any topic of your choice. Five suggested topics were provided last year:
 - a. “Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
 - b. “Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.”
 - c. “Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.”
 - d. “Describe a character in fiction, an historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, or science) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.”
 - e. “A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.”
- Many schools require a supplemental application, and some of those require additional essays. There are generally 3 types of essay questions asked: the personal statement, the college essay, and the creative question.
- Before you do any writing, go to www.exampleessays.com and read a few example essays to get a feel for the caliber of writing admissions officers are looking for. Don’t even consider copying or modifying one of those essays, though, because not only is it illegal, but college admissions officers also know about this website and monitor this regularly.
- Every essay question allows you to choose a topic within the general category. Your choice demonstrates your values and preferences, humor and depth of knowledge – all things that give the admissions officers a good look at your priorities and personality – so spend a couple *weeks* brainstorming and writing down your ideas before you choose one and start writing the essay. Your topic should be focused and specific (about one experience, time period, or characteristic). Insincere, thrown-together, tasteless, or bland responses *will* hurt your chances of admission.
- Personal statements are a response to the general question, “Tell us about yourself” – how you would describe yourself, what you like best and least, what you’ve learned about yourself from your response to struggles, what motivates you, what defines you, even which book has affected you the most or which academic experience has meant the most to you. To answer these questions, give yourself plenty of time to reflect on yourself and be imaginative. Write a story about something real in your life. Colleges want a glimpse into your thoughts, values, and passions – in other words, they want authenticity, not profundity. Don’t force a moral of the story, but mention it if the lessons you learned didn’t seem to match up with what you’ve always been told. Be real and speak from the heart.
- Just because it’s a personal statement doesn’t mean you can’t seek help from others. If the topic asks you to analyze your strengths and weaknesses, ask parents, friends, teachers, coworkers, and others to tell you their opinions of you as well. This is extremely humbling, so be ready to accept and learn from the responses. Then think about how to exploit the good and minimize the bad. You may do this by detailing the great effects of your virtues and the minimal effects of your flaws, or you may indicate a desire to change your weak points for the better.
- College essays usually ask why you chose the college, why you chose a certain major or career, or what your goals are in life. To answer this question, make sure you know the school well (i.e., don’t write that you plan to major in dance if the school doesn’t have a dance program) and have good reasons for choosing that school or career path over others.
- The creative question gives admission officers indirect insight into your personality by asking about your choices – who your hero is, who has influenced you the most, what you believe about a societal issue, what you would put in a time capsule, etc. To answer this question, think carefully about

your response and come up with several reasons for choosing what you did. Colleges want evidence of reasoned decision-making, not emotional or random choices.

- The worst (and most common) essay topics to choose are your relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend (overused), religious beliefs (many can't relate), political views (too controversial), sex (too informal), great SAT scores (too arrogant), or schemes for world peace (naïve).
- The worst (and most common) essay mistakes are to use an overconfident (arrogant) tone; to review your academics and extracurriculars and congratulate yourself on your achievements; to write about something emotional, controversial, or risky; to use contrived or thesaurus vocabulary; to write more than the limit allows; and to write about yourself in 3rd person (using "one" instead of "I" because that's what our teachers always tell us to do).
- Don't write what you think they want to hear – another brag sheet, all the great things about their school, the commitment involved to become someone of your chosen profession, or the evils of terrorism.
- No matter which topic you choose, develop your main idea with facts, experiences, reasons, and examples. Do your research if necessary (the names of an author's novels, etc.) to make your essay accurate.
- Find patterns and connections between aspects about yourself and your activities: was playing baseball really about the sport or the friendships? Did you take the job for the money or the love of the work? What other times have you endured hardship to gain what mattered to you?
- Don't be longwinded or resort to gimmicks, and don't focus on the negative or seek pity for a disadvantaged background. Avoid generic and predictable writing by using specific details and vivid descriptions. Give each essay a creative title, not "the ____ that changed my life".
- Edit your essays thoroughly before you transfer them to the application. Do *not* rely on your computer's spelling or grammar check feature; it will consistently overlook wrong words if they're spelled correctly.
- Get at least 3 adults who are strong writers to edit your essay – parents, teachers, family friends, etc. Colleges don't allow assistance in *creating* the essay, but they do allow assistance in editing, including detailed suggestions regarding content, structure, style, tone, vocabulary, and mechanics, as long as the essay retains a high schooler's "voice". In other words, it's not only OK to get others to help you by making suggestions, but colleges *expect you to do so* (because that's standard procedure in college and the professional world).
- Start writing your best in everything you do – school papers and tests, the SAT and ACT, even notes to mom and emails to friends – both to improve the quality of your writing and to consistently demonstrate your ability. Admissions officers receive a copy of your SAT and ACT essays, so a red flag will go up if you submit amazing application essays after getting low writing scores on the tests. *Note: Because so many students are now acquiring and even hiring extensive help on college essays beyond what the college limits allow, it is my personal opinion that colleges will soon give more weight your SAT and ACT essays than to your application essays. At the very least, they will compare the writing style of these essays to those on your college application to make sure you didn't hire someone to write your application essays for you.*

11. Recommendations

- Colleges use recommendations to evaluate your *intellect* (academic curiosity, achievement, potential, originality of thought, ability to express yourself in writing, effective class discussion); your *work habits* (self-motivation, initiative, independence, discipline, energy, enthusiasm); your *maturity* (sense of responsibility, self-confidence, leadership potential, reaction to setbacks); and your *strength of character* (integrity, concern for others, warmth, respect accorded by faculty, capacity for growth, and even your sense of humor).
- You need a guidance counselor's recommendation ("school report") for the Common Application, so get to know the counselors at your school.
- You also need recommendations ("teacher evaluations") from 2 junior-year or senior-year teachers in different subjects, so you can't depend on that one

	<p>teacher who really liked you in 9th grade.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You're not limited to only these 3 recommendations though. Get as many recommendations as possible, and choose a variety of people to illustrate the breadth of your skills (an English teacher, science teacher, soccer coach, school newspaper advisor, employer, youth leader, etc.). • Choose people you have a good relationship with – people who respect you, who really know you on a personal level, and who know your interests and skills. Personal details and anecdotes make a much stronger recommendation than generic references to your brag sheet. • A great deal of the recommendation addresses the kind of person you show yourself to be, so if you're going to have any hope of getting good recommendations, you need to demonstrate a good attitude in class, on the field, and in everything else you do. • Ask for all recommendations at least 3 weeks in advance – people are busy, and you need to give them plenty of time to write a good one. • Popular teachers get asked for many recommendations, so either ask those teachers early or go to a different teacher for one. You risk getting a generic recommendation due to time constraints otherwise. • Make a list of the colleges you're applying to and give a copy of the list along with your transcript, test scores (if not on the transcript), and brag sheet to each person giving you a recommendation. This will give them a bigger picture of your life than what they see on a daily basis, and any individual touches they can make to each copy of your recommendation (addressing it to the school, etc.) can only help your case. • Remember, no one has to give you a recommendation just because you ask them to. They're doing you a favor. Be sure to write a thank-you note to everyone who wrote you a recommendation, and update them on your college decisions as you make them. • If your family knows a graduate of a school you're applying to, seek that person's recommendation <i>if and only if he meets all the other requirements</i>. An insider's opinion that you'd be a good fit for the college is a valuable thing, but a glowing recommendation from your parents' influential friend could actually hurt your chances for admission if that person doesn't know you well. Remember, admissions officers review so many applications that they can spot a suck-up mile away. • Give each person an envelope addressed to each college to put copies of their recommendation in. You can either collect the sealed envelopes from those people (recommended) or give them a stamped envelope to mail it themselves.
--	--

<p>12. Institutional Requirements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certain colleges have individual application requirements based on to the type of institutions they are. Always check the requirements of each institution, as specific requirements may vary. • To specialized institutions, these aspects of the application package are just as important as the others. Treat every requirement with the same care you would an essay, writing and editing your responses separately before you transfer them to the application. • Certain university programs – engineering, pre-med, pre-law, etc. – have their own requirements beyond those for general admission. If you're certain you want to enter a certain program, make sure you check out the program requirements at each school to which you are applying. • Military academies require certain life-stage conditions and physical capabilities in addition to these standard qualifications. Admissions officers also look at ROTC involvement, family military history, and strong demonstrations of moral character and integrity. • Art institutes generally require a portfolio of work in that discipline. Admissions officers look at the quality, diversity, and size of your portfolio, your exhibit or performance history, and evidence of real-world cultural exposure. • Religious colleges often require a written profession of faith, a clear testimony of life change, a few essays on religious topics, review of their doctrinal position, character references from religious leaders, and evidence of dedicated ministry
--	---

	<p>involvement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition, homeschooled students must usually submit additional documentation to every college where they apply. This may include a statement describing the homeschool structure and mission, GED scores, a separate writing sample, a state high school equivalency certificate, and a statement from the district superintendent affirming the successful completion of state proficiency tests.
<p>13. Demonstrated Interest</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your genuine interest in a college is important because every college wants to admit people who will attend. Admissions officers don't want to waste slots that other students could have filled, so they have to play their own game with this. • We've mentioned how good application forms and individualized recommendations and essays demonstrate interest, but other factors can be used to demonstrate a particular interest as well. • Be sure to declare an intended major and profession on your application. You can always change it later (most people will), but right now it demonstrates direction in your life and interest in the school's programs, not just its reputation. Take some time to think about it, and if you're not absolutely certain, rate your choice one level from the top on the certainty scale (if there is one). Indicate on the application or in the interview that you need to find out more information about everything it entails before you can be absolutely certain. • Make sure you also indicate that you intend to participate in college extracurricular activities. Again, you can always change your mind later about which ones to pursue, but indicate that you plan to be involved and contribute to campus life outside of the classroom. And if you're not 100% certain about these choices either, just indicate that you need more information about the programs to be absolutely certain. • Make sure you select the option to receive your admissions decision by email (in addition to a mailed letter). This demonstrates an eagerness to know whether you got in, which is a sure sign of genuine interest. • There are many ways to demonstrate interest; the key is to be proactive about doing so (although not annoying), because it factors greatly into the admissions decision.
<p>14. Supplementary Materials</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although supplementary materials are always optional, including them in the application package demonstrates extraordinary interest in the college and a willingness to go the extra mile for admission. • Choose and send the best work you've done throughout high school, especially if you've received awards or recognition for it. Try to send a variety of work demonstrating your interests and abilities. • Send materials that demonstrate a talent – artwork, music, homemade movies, writing, or advanced academic work – even if you don't plan to major in that subject. • If you don't feel that any of your high school work was particularly good, don't include it in your application package – remember, it's entirely optional, and you don't want anything to detract from your application. If you're not sure whether something is good enough to send, have a few of your teachers evaluate it briefly and tell you what they think in light of the school you want to send it to. • The best way to package this is to record everything on one CD (artwork may be scanned and burned to CD). • If the school gives the opportunity to submit an additional essay of your choice, use that opportunity to explain any glaring deficiencies you may have in your application (GPA, SAT scores, very little extracurricular involvement for awhile, etc.). This is one of your best opportunities to disarm any objections they may have to admitting you.
<p>15. Campus Visits/Interviews</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A campus visit and interview demonstrate your sincere interest in the school and give you an opportunity to demonstrate the intangibles that may not come

across on your application: your confidence, charisma, social skills, manners, and interest in life and learning.

- Because so many students take virtual campus tours online, a campus visit and interview adds a personal touch that could be crucial to your chances for admission.
- Remember, both you and your interviewer will be trying to figure out whether the school would be a good fit for you, so you're interviewing them as much as they're interviewing you. Keep this in mind from the beginning and it will do wonders for your confidence level.
- Because practice and experience improve interviewing skills, don't schedule your first-choice school as your first visit and interview. Don't schedule it as your last either, because you may begin to sound rehearsed by then. Schedule it somewhere in the middle so you are sufficiently polished and yet still authentic.
- Do your research on the college website and in the online viewbook and catalog (printed if they mailed them) before you go. Come up with a list of honest questions unanswered by your research – questions about majors, campus life, campus improvements, financial aid, AP credit, school placement testing, class scheduling advisors, etc. Asking good questions during the interview will impress the admissions officer, but questions answered in their publications only indicate a lack of preparedness. If you find answers to all your questions by doing your research or asking the tour guide, you can always let the admissions officer know that.
- Know your transcript and be prepared to answer questions about it. Review commonly asked interview questions and think about the content of your responses, but don't memorize answers or you'll sound like a magazine salesman.
- PRACTICE! *Videotape* mock interviews with a few different adults and ask them to evaluate you honestly. You'll not only learn what you need to improve, but you'll begin to feel more comfortable after awhile.
- Dress appropriately, even for coaches. Nothing should be informal or revealing. Men should wear dress pants or khakis with a shirt and tie, and women should wear a dress, pants suit, or nice slacks and a blouse. And remember, you'll be walking around campus all day, so wear *comfortable* dress shoes (women, no high heels!).
- Arrive 10 minutes early to all interviews, and don't schedule anything else within 2 hours of the interview – you don't want to be rushed.
- Introduce the interviewer to your parents when he first comes out to meet you. Manners and simple social graces can go a long way.
- Parents, hang back unless the admissions officer addresses you. This is the student's show. Admissions officers say that overly involved parents do more to hurt a student's application bid than help it, because the interference takes away the student's voice, originality, and passion.
- Students, body language says a lot, so relax and be confident during the interview. Don't fidget or do the restless leg thing, or you'll stress out the interviewer. Sit up straight and keep general eye contact without being rigid or staring them down.
- When answering questions, don't ramble. Keep your answers brief and to the point.
- Don't brag, but don't be self-deprecating either. Focus on your interests and accomplishments in education and extracurriculars.
- Be friendly and cheerful, but not overly intimate (e.g., don't share love life details or talk about partying). Be sure not to criticize anyone or speak about sensitive issues. Keep things a little formal.
- If you think one of your extracurriculars is particularly impressive, think about how to bring it up and discuss it. Some good ways are to ask the interviewer if he or she is interested in the topic, whether the campus program is solid, or whether there are other avenues of involvement in the off-campus community.
- If you have a glaring deficiency in your application, be proactive and bring it up during the interview. Explain the reason for it and that it's one of the reasons you wanted an interview. If you show potential and prove that you've genuinely

	<p>turned things around, this could get you in.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you finish an interview early, call the next one in line to see if you can start that interview early. Be considerate of the fact that they're busy. • Be sure to send a thank-you note to everyone who interviewed you as soon as you get home. <i>This can go a long way with interviewers.</i>
<p>16. Application Deadlines</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no grace whatsoever on application deadlines, so careful planning, organization, and motivation to meet deadlines are all crucial in the application process. • Send a complete application package if at all possible. Many colleges will compile your application components as they receive them – recommendations, test scores, etc. – but if you do that work for them, the admissions department will notice. • If there is a “preferred” deadline for processing, make sure you meet it. • If there is a “priority” deadline to receive first consideration for merit-based scholarships and special college programs, meet that as well. • Even if the college has a rolling admissions policy, apply as early as possible – class openings and financial aid are still limited. • Always call the admissions office before the deadline to make sure they received your application materials on time. This not only prevents a wrong delivery from destroying your chances of admission, but also demonstrates your interest in the school. Ask for an admissions officer – the one you spoke with at the college fair, if you went to one – and take some time to be friendly and chat a little bit. Make sure you write down the name of the admissions officer you speak with so you can ask for that person by name next time.
<p>17. Applying Early</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying for early admission demonstrates extraordinary interest in the college, which is why the best students usually do it. Applicants who meet the early deadline (usually Nov. 1st) receive an early response (usually in mid-December). • Because colleges want to admit students they're certain will attend, the admission rate of early applicants is 2-3 <i>times</i> that of regular applicants. • A 2002 study at Harvard equated the advantage of applying early to a 100-point increase in your SAT score. • Early Decision (ED) – students may only apply early to that college and are obligated to attend if accepted. This used to be the only option for early admission, and is still used by many selective private colleges. • Early Action (EA) – students may apply early to other colleges and are not obligated to attend if accepted. This allows students to compare financial aid offers before committing to attend any college. • Single-Choice Early Action (SCEA) – students may only apply early to that college but are not obligated to attend if accepted (note: some programs allow students to apply to a <i>public</i> college's Early Action program; read the college's individual SCEA policy on the college's website). Schools such as Harvard, Stanford, Yale, and UNC have adopted this to make room for financial considerations. • To apply for early admission, you should have an upward grade trend and a strong transcript by the end of your junior year.
<p>18. Post-Application Reports</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although post-application reports are optional at many colleges, sending them demonstrates a sincere continued interest in the college. Admissions officers use the reports to evaluate your consistency and determine whether you still meet admissions standards. • The bottom line: you can't afford to slack off even after your applications are in. Most colleges will revoke your admission if your grades have slipped too far. • So many colleges now want to see your first semester senior grades that the Common Application includes a mid-year school report for your guidance counselor to fill out and send to colleges where you applied. Some schools even want a record of your high school exit exam scores.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be sure to have all your senior year AP and IB exam scores sent to the schools you're considering attending. • Always call the admissions officer you talked to before to make sure the office received all of your post-application materials. Again, be friendly.
<p>19. Legacy/Alumni Relations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although the power of a "family legacy" has diminished over time, many selective colleges still like to provide alumni with the benefit of priority admissions consideration for their children and grandchildren. Colleges understand that students have no control over this factor, but those who do have the luxury of a family history at the college should exploit it. • Colleges only offer preference to early admission legacy applicants since that is the best measure of sincere interest and loyalty. • This favoritism is only enough to give a legacy applicant the edge over someone else with the same qualifications. Donating millions of dollars to a college isn't even enough to secure a student's admission apart from the proper qualifications these days. • Those with a relative or some other connection currently on staff at the school, particularly in a professorship or administrative role, enjoy a much stronger advantage over legacy and non-legacy applicants.
<p>20. Other Factors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several other factors may be used by individual colleges to determine admission. These factors are usually determined by college values. • These could include race, ethnicity, gender, or background. We're not going to discuss whether these preferences <i>should</i> exist; the fact is that they do. University means "unity in diversity"; the institutions were founded with the intention of unifying people through knowledge, so they often make a conscience attempt at increasing diversity to counteract societal biases that cause under-representation. So if you're a minority, mention that. And if you have a solid high school background in an atypical subject for your gender (e.g., women in science or mathematics), list that as a major even if you're not certain about it (no one really is anyway). • The location of the school can affect your chances of admission. Competitive state schools like UC Berkeley and UVA give preference to in-state students, while many other private and international universities give preference to remote students to increase their diversity.

APPLICATION PROCESS SUGGESTIONS

- If your credentials aren't looking too good right now – academically or personally – start taking it seriously and showing significant improvement. It will demonstrate a work ethic, pride, and discipline that will make both the admissions officers and those giving recommendations sit up and take notice.
- Review your transcript with your guidance counselor to ensure its accuracy, then assemble each application package and send it yourself. This saves you the stress of wondering whether your guidance counselor sent it, and that's one more application the counselor doesn't have to handle.
- After calling to make sure your application materials have arrived, don't call the admissions office anymore unless something on your application needs to be changed. Calling to find out whether you've been accepted before decisions have been released won't get you an answer, and it will irritate the admissions officers.
- If you end up being deferred for early admission or waitlisted at your first-choice college, you're not alone; last year approximately 134,000 students were placed on waiting lists. What will make you one of the 15,000 who are eventually granted admission is writing the admissions office a *letter* (not an email). You should not only update the school on your grades, test scores, and brag sheet since you last applied, but also state why that college is your first choice and that you will attend if accepted. Again, since colleges want to admit students they are certain will attend, such a letter could be the final convincing factor in your admission.

FINANCIAL AID

- As soon as you finish sending your college applications – even before you're accepted – start pursuing financial aid. Families with a \$100,000 household income are still eligible for financial aid, and so much money is available that much of it goes unclaimed every year. Even if none of your colleges offer merit-based scholarships, apply for aid from other organizations.
- Because there are so many different types of scholarships available and certain ones are more competitive than others, you'll need to be efficient in the search and application process. Check with your guidance office to find local scholarship opportunities that might not be listed online. Then go on the internet and search for scholarships relating to specific interests, abilities, or qualities that others may not share with you (e.g., scholarships for black female athletes, Native American musicians, sons of Jaycees members, people with food allergies, etc.). Start searching and applying for local and state scholarships before taking on competitive national scholarships. Some of the largest scholarship databases can be found at www.nacac.com/w_finaid.html, www.collegexpress.com, and www.collegenet.com/mach25.
- Have your family do their taxes in January of your senior year so you can have those figures available to fill out and send in your FAFSA as soon as possible.
- Instead of re-doing everything for your scholarship and grant applications, use your college application information – your scores, brag sheet, supplementary materials, recommendations, and even your essays if slight or no modification is required to address the application's essay question. The point isn't to get your scholarship applications in early – that usually doesn't provide you with any advantage – but to be efficient so you can apply for as many as possible. Always save the old and new versions of essays for any future use.
- Save all your college and financial aid application records *at least* until the end of your freshman year of college in case a school or organization loses your records, you need to reapply for scholarships for following years, or you end up deciding to transfer (it happens more often than you'd think).

ALTERNATIVES TO A 4-YEAR COLLEGE

- Don't think you have to go to a 4-year college right out of high school just because it seems like everyone else does. If you aren't motivated to go that route, you're probably not going to do well the first year anyway. Whatever the reason is, it might be a better idea for you to take a year or two off of school to work and save money for college. Often a little time out of school is enough to motivate students and grow their appreciation for the value of higher education.
- Another alternative is working with a volunteer program. This not only provides a good break from school, but opens students' eyes to the needs of the world outside themselves, which can breed a stronger vision for what they want to contribute to it. Many students enter college more eagerly and seriously afterwards.
- An often understated and overlooked alternative is community college. Most high school students look down on community college as a place people only go if they can't get into a 4-year college, but that's simply not true. Community college is actually a very smart way to go, *even for good students*, because it allows you to pay *much* less for the core classes you would have to take at a 4-year college anyway. And by staying at home or rooming with a few friends, you can save a lot on living expenses as well. If you don't have the high school credentials to get into the college you want to, community college is a great opportunity to start over and step up your game so you can transfer to a 4-year school and make a smooth transition after your first year or two.
- But let me warn you: choosing any of these alternatives doesn't give you an excuse to blow off high school. Transfer applicants to 4-year colleges still have to provide their high school transcript and test scores. So if you don't have a good record now, at least show improvement between now and the end of your senior year, because transfer admission is 2-3 times as competitive as freshman admission at most colleges.

CONCLUSIONS

Which of the factors of admission can still be changed?

All of them, if you just start applying yourself! The problem is that admissions officers know this.

Which factors are the most objective measures of a student's academic ability?

The numerical ones – GPA, class rank, and test scores. That's why admissions officers place so much emphasis on them.

Which numerical factor can be changed the fastest?

GPA can take an entire year to change, and you're limited even then as to how much you can change it. The SAT Subject Tests, AP tests, and IB exams require a full year of coursework in addition to any supplementary studying you may do to prepare. Only your SAT and ACT scores can change dramatically in a matter of *weeks*.

How can SAT and ACT scores be changed?

We all hear about the many Honors and AP students who have perfect GPAs at school and yet have poor-to-mediocre SAT and ACT scores. It baffles us. How could students who do so well academically not perform well on a college entrance exam that's based entirely on subjects they've been studying in school? If it were merely a matter of test anxiety, they would have experienced poor test performance throughout their academic careers, and it would have been reflected in their GPAs. So why is it that top-notch students in the same classes consistently experience completely different results on the SAT and ACT? How is it that even intelligent *siblings* can differ so much in their scores? If it's not the academic environment that makes the difference, what is it?

Many reputable sources have looked at these findings and published statements saying the SAT and even the ACT are tests of innate ability. That's a lie. Did you hear that? It's a lie. But it's a lie that has been propagated since the inception of these tests because most people don't understand the nature of them. It's true that the tests don't mimic the format of the tests given in schools, but that doesn't mean it measures skills that can't be learned.

The fact is that these are CRITICAL THINKING tests. School tests tend to be content-driven – they generally focus on memorization and regurgitation or your ability to apply processes to the standard problem types that have been taught to you. The SAT and ACT, on the other hand, measure your *mastery* of that knowledge with non-standard problem types. It tests whether you have a comprehensive grasp of those concepts by your ability to recognize the various problem-solving situations in which that content knowledge can be logically combined and applied. Just because this kind of critical thinking isn't focused on in school doesn't mean it's a skill that can't be taught.